PIZZINE

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1 | MARCH 2023

EDITOR'S NOTE

The thing about credibility – I don't really have any. I could try to claim some genetic predilection toward pizza, having been born in New Jersey (Exit 105, Garden State Parkway), but I should probably also point out that I only lived there for a couple of years. Even if my diet as a toddler was enough to impart a discerning palate and a deep affection for pizza, I'm sure it doesn't qualify me to write a cookbook. Probably not even a little pamphlet. I've never had a job in food service, haven't been to culinary school, I've never ran a pizza pop-up, I don't have a degree in anything relevant like food science or thermodynamics. I could cite my passion for pizza or the paunch my enthusiasm has earned me, but I don't think either of those things are particularly special.

What I do have going for me is that I honed my pizza making skills in a spectacularly average kitchen setup. Laminate countertops, a small and underpowered oven with a squeaky broiler drawer, no dishwasher or garbage disposal, and no giant island. My best guess is that I made north of two hundred pizzas in that kitchen.

With an abundance of respect and gratitude to the professionals who've sought to impart lessons and wisdom about pizza to common rabble like me, there's a context mismatch you encounter when trying to apply professional techniques to amateur settings. If you aren't a professional or a wizard, it can be hard to learn from professionals or wizards; you may in fact be better off learning from some slouch like me.

So really, what I am is a guy without any extraordinary talent who's cooked a lot of pizzas in a kitchen like (or maybe worse than) yours. ♦

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THE TROUBLE WITH GOOD ADVICE

00 flour
Cooked too long for texture and too short for color
Not enough heat
Also 00 flour
Still not enough heat
Too much cheese (though that's just on me)
Fresh mozzarella
Too much dough

I made pizza that looked like these (previous page) for a long, long time.

As it turns out, it's easy to make something satisfying. You can dunk a saltine cracker in some Campbell's tomato soup and put a sprinkle of pre-shredded mozzarella on top and it'll be kinda tasty in its own right. Good pizza, though, is a hard thing to make. Challenges come at you from three different directions – the equipment you have access to, the ingredients you can source, and your own personal skill. It took me ages to make even modest progress, and each little incremental gain felt like a hard-earned revelation. I spent a lot of time banging my head against the wall.

Some of the red herrings I've chased:

- **Fresh mozz.** It took years for me to discover that I should be using low moisture, whole milk mozzarella. I just kept trying it with fresh mozzarella, over and over.
- **Tossing dough.** I kept trying to learn to toss pizza dough in the air. Not necessary and very likely not helpful at home.
- **Alchemy.** I dabbled for a while in vital wheat gluten, diastatic malt powder, and scalded milk, as examples. I even considered some essential at one point.
- **00 Flour.** 00 is finely milled, unmalted flour used in Naples. I also tried with different blends of 00 and bread flour, with a little all purpose or rye flour in the mix, and a special blend of rustic, locally grown wheat.
- **Homemade mozz.** After multiple attempts with different milk and rennet, I can make vaguely creamy bike tires, but not mozz.
- **Canning tomatoes.** I've grown and canned my own tomatoes – not an easy feat at 7,000 feet above sea level in a dry climate. My canned sauce is downright astringent.
- **Cooked sauce.** I cooked my sauce for years, sometimes from fresh tomatoes, sometimes from a wrong can of tomatoes, and sometimes defeating a right can of tomatoes.
- **Sourdough.**

Often, I was trying to learn about what brilliant pizza makers do and trying to emulate it. There's a whole host of reasons I couldn't.

First off, let's talk about the differences between a home oven and pizza ovens. Your home oven, at least in the US, might go up to 500°F or 550°F. It's got metal walls, a sizeable burner in the bottom and if you're lucky, also at the top, and maybe even another behind a convection fan. You open a big door and cook things on racks. You preheat it and turn it off when you're done.

The deck oven at your neighborhood pizzeria can get to much higher temperatures and its surfaces are much thicker and heavier. It has enormously powerful burners, narrow little doors and low ceilings, a heavy and conductive hearth to cook on, and it is left on all day. This translates to a lot more heat energy, and everything you throw in that deck oven is going to behave differently. This is even truer when comparing a home oven to a brick oven with a wood fire in it.

00 flour and wet, fresh mozzarella work perfectly in a 900°F oven. The 00 flour resists browning (since it's unmalted) and can stand up to those temperatures for a minute or a minute and a half; the extra moisture in the mozzarella has to boil off before the cheese can char. Neapolitan sauce is never cooked, because cooking it beforehand would eliminate some of that moisture that it needs to keep from igniting.

When you slop those same ingredients together on a preheated stone in your comparatively wimpy home oven, they just never cook. It might take twenty minutes to produce something that looks tremendous, but the crust will be pretty dusty and the middle might still be soggy, even by Neapolitan standards.

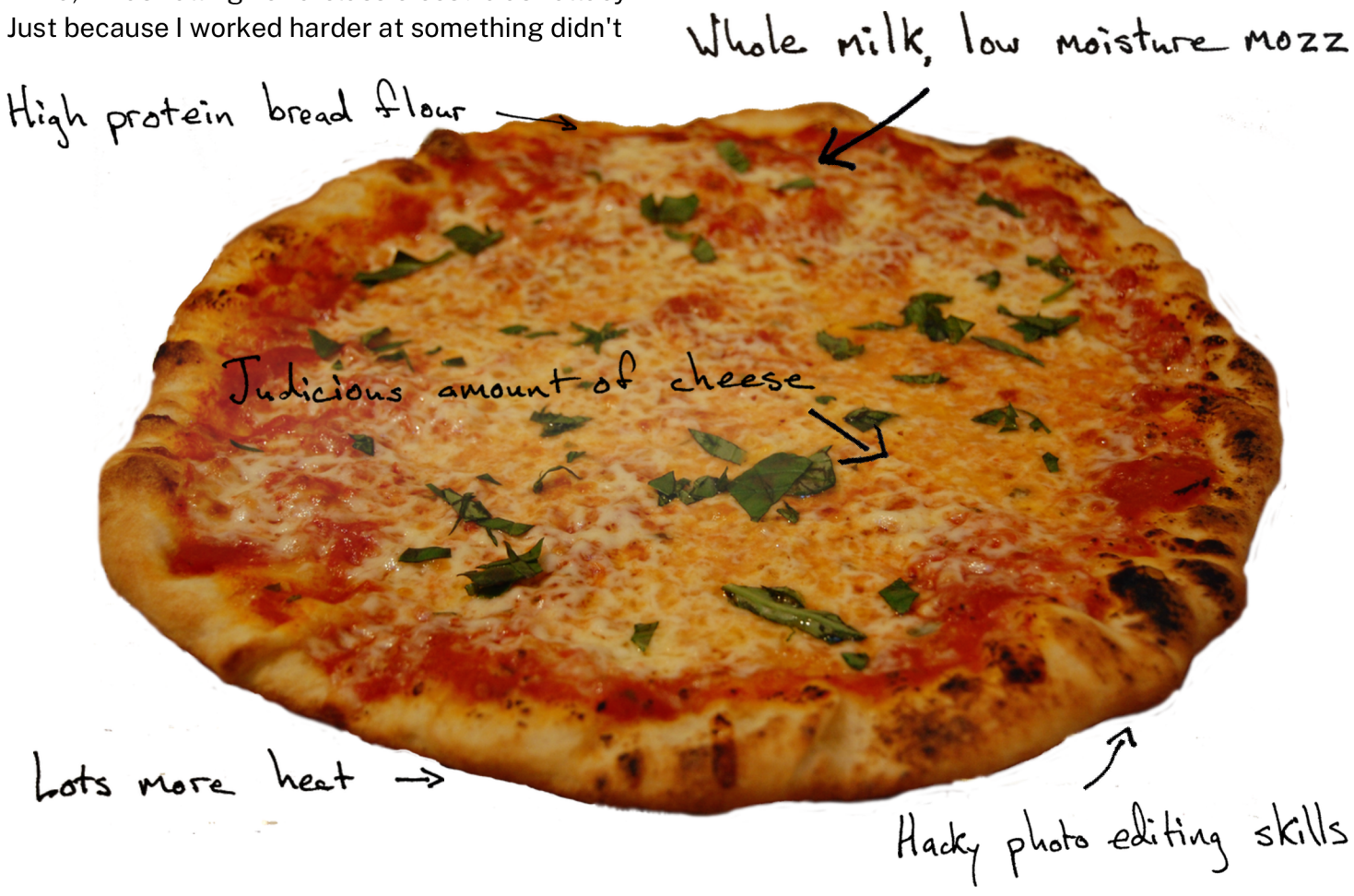
That's like a hundred pizzas in a year; the pizzeria down the street from you might turn out that many per night. →

THE TROUBLE WITH GOOD ADVICE (Continued)

Second, there's a matter of practice. Let's say you're real serious about making pizza at home and religiously make a couple of pies every Saturday; any vacations or weekends off are offset by times that you make more pies for company. That's like a hundred pizzas in a year; the cooks at the pizzeria down the street from you might turn out that many per night. You'll certainly get better at working with dough as you make more pizzas, but not like a professional. The same principle applies to a lot of other pizza skills – launching your pizzas, rotating them in the oven, knowing exactly when to pull them, judging what temperature your water should be or whether you need to add a little extra, compensating for different ingredients if you're out of your normal element; the list goes on. This problem is even more exaggerated if you're a rube like me trying to take advice from pizza wizards.

Third, I was falling for a classic cost bias fallacy. Just because I worked harder at something didn't make it better. Sourcing more exotic ingredients doesn't always make better pizza. Doing things from super scratch -- growing your own tomatoes, blanching them, peeling them, running them through a food mill, straining them, and canning them -- might not make for an improvement. It actually probably won't; as good as a home-grown tomato is, you don't have an autoclave and can't safely can without adding some sort of acid. I've learned I can buy better cheese and canned tomatoes than I can make.

Not entirely separate from the cost bias fallacy is sourdough. It takes a lot of work, some luck, and it does not suffer fools. I know I always feel like I have to do something with the discard, and it gets relentless. If that's the quest you want to be on, do it, but do it because you want to do the whole sourdough thing, not because you think it's likely to improve your pizza very much. ♦


Whole milk, low moisture mozz
High protein bread flour
Judicious amount of cheese
Lots more heat
Hacky photo editing skills

THE WHITE WHALE

*

I like nearly all pizza. I like that cardboard stuff at school cafeterias. I like Totino's Pizza Rolls and Pizza Bagels. I like the tortilla pizzas I make for the kids after mowing the lawn on a Saturday. I like most of the big chains, even if I don't really love giving them money. I like a thick, overcheesed slice like I remember washing down with Mountain Dew at sleepovers, a little dot of orange grease causing my thumb to slip off of the 'A' button and lose at Mario Kart '64. I like a Vera Pizza Napoletana certified pizza; I like Sicilian or grandma squares; I like a crispy, crackery party cut tavern pizza. We eat French bread, bagel, or English muffin pizzas pretty regularly around here, too.

Don't mistake my general pizza enthusiasm as hollow contentment, though. I've been chasing the New York plain cheese slice with zeal and purpose. I'm not entirely sure what put me on this hunt, as my earliest memories of pizza aren't good ones. I have a very hazy memory of eating all the pepperoni off of my parents' pizza, probably before I was even three years old, and barfing it all up. Somewhere along the line, something changed. I think it really clicked when my family went back to visit the East Coast when I was 17. We went to this pizzeria -- Siino's, which is now Belo Pizza -- in Eatontown, NJ, and it changed me.

I have trouble figuring out whether I've got a vivid memory of the place itself, or if it's just an amalgamation of '90s memories that have clung to the imprint the slices themselves made. I think we sat on wooden benches with metal legs. I think the tables had thick, red and white vinyl tablecloths. I think it had a Galaga and Ms. Pac Man arcade table. We probably had a clear pitcher of root beer, which would have had ice clinging to its sides, threatening to dislodge all at once right as my brother filled his pebbly red drinking cup.

The slice, though, I remember. 17-year-old me was trying to eat pizza right, watching how the locals folded it. They don't crease it, they put about a 135 degree bend in it. I remember this slice taking a gentle roll, with only the very edge of the crust cracking. Microblisters on the crust and bottom gave a shattering crispiness without adding any dryness or crunch. The crust had a chewiness to it that fought back a little but wasn't bready. The cheese formed extravagant strings when you lifted a slice out of the pan and when you pulled it away from your mouth after taking a bite. It burned a blister into the roof of my mouth that I tried to scrape off with my tongue for days afterward. I didn't reach for the parmesan, the garlic salt, or the crushed red peppers. The sauce was bright and fruity, the cheese salty with a little funk. I think we also had a forgettable slice somewhere near the Plaza Hotel just a day or two later; the depth of disappointment I felt when it wasn't the same was my first taste of my new life as a pizza obsessive.

At first, I was content to chase this White Whale by trying as many pizza places as I could. It was a good time for a pizza quest, really, since Chris Bianco had kicked off a renaissance in Phoenix, where I grew up, and Flagstaff, where I live, has always had a number of pretty surprisingly good pizza joints for a place of its size (of particular note is Pizzicletta, which I rate very nearly as high as Bianco). Still, while the availability of Neapolitan pies helps scratch the itch, it wasn't getting me any closer to Moby Dick. ♦

*Siino's Pizzeria name and graphic are courtesy of Belo Pizza; all rights reserved by Belo Pizza

EAT AT HOME

MAKING PIZZA IN YOUR HOME OVEN

WHY, THOUGH?

Truthfully, I don't know why I got so into making pizza at home.

There has been great pizza in my home town for decades -- some that's extraordinary (Pizzicletta, which I find myself mentioning yet again), really good delivery options, two noteworthy upscale options with ties to New Jersey, and a number of good local slice shops.

I don't consider myself particularly ambitious, but maybe it's an anomalous affection for challenge. I think it has been good for me to sort of fail at something for years, only making incremental progress in fits and starts. That kind of grind is instructive about the learning process.

I will say that it's a lot cheaper than ordering pizza , even if you're using excellent ingredients. There's also the ingredients piece. You can use better tomatoes and better cheese than people who have to turn a profit can, provided you can get a hold of those better ingredients.

We had an excellent pizzeria in town that made great NYC-style pizza and tomato pies but the proprietor didn't like making Hawaiian pizzas and refused to do it.

You also might not have a certain kind of pizza available in your area. Most medium-sized towns probably have a decent wood-fired operation at this point. You can probably also find a place that delivers heavily cheesed pizza with a little thicker crust almost anywhere. Proper NYC-style pizza isn't quite as plentiful -- most everything shoots to be fancier or is somehow derivative.

Or maybe you want really wacky toppings. We had an excellent pizzeria in town that made great NYC-style pizza and tomato pies, but the proprietor (who I really like) didn't like making Hawaiian pizzas and refused to do it.

I can respect that, though I'd have been out of luck if that's what I wanted. If you're making it yourself, you can do whatever you want.

I particularly like one I've been making with white sauce, roasted corn, green chiles, and tomatoes, with some cilantro and queso fresco added after it comes out of the oven. I'll sometimes do a take on Hawaiian with pineapple chunks and ham glazed in pineapple syrup and Calabrian chiles. Maybe you want one with white gravy, cheese curds, and popcorn chicken.

Elote pizza, up close because none of my photos fit the pizza to the frame.

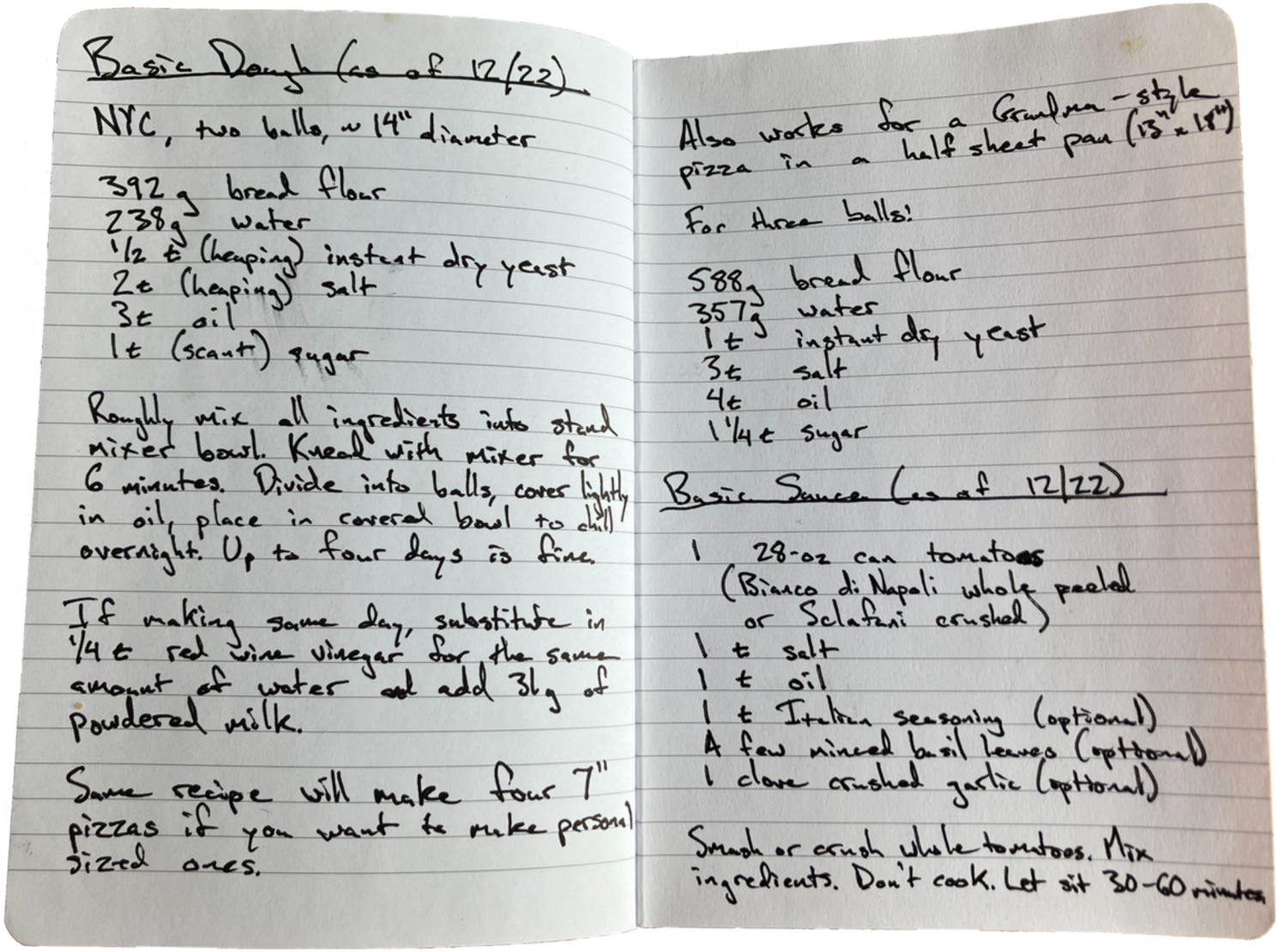
Finally, I think you can make an argument that being able to eat your pizza at home, fresher and hotter, gives it a bit of an edge over anything that sits in a box for twenty or more minutes. I've also seen pizza industry advice suggesting pizzerias *reduce* the heat for delivery pizza, since it'll travel better baked a little lower. That means, theoretically, at least, you can do better at home.

DOUGH

You can buy dough at the pizzeria down the street; it'll be good and not terribly expensive. If you're going to make a lot of pizza, though, you'll want to make your own dough. It's really pretty simple, not very time consuming, and requires minimal equipment.

My favorite way to list recipe quantities is to use grams for flour and water and regular old spoon measurements for the other ingredients. Flour is compressible and measuring cups just aren't precise enough, so a digital scale makes a big difference when it comes to consistency. Water, obviously, isn't going to vary at all in volume, but it's still much more convenient to measure with a digital scale. The graduation lines on your standard Pyrex or Anchor Hocking glass measuring cup aren't very fine, and further, glass is inherently inconsistent and you likely haven't (or at least I haven't) bothered to scratch new, calibrated lines on the pitcher.

For the other ingredients, though, I think measuring spoons are more accurate unless you're also going out and buying a jeweler's scale. Salt, white sugar, and yeast don't really



Basic Dough (as of 12/22)

NYC, two balls, ~ 14" diameter

392 g bread flour
238g water
1/2 t (heaping) instant dry yeast
2t (heaping) salt
3t oil
1t (scant) sugar

Roughly mix all ingredients into stand mixer bowl. Knead with mixer for 6 minutes. Divide into balls, cover lightly in oil, place in covered bowl to chill overnight. Up to four days is fine.

If making same day, substitute in 1/4 t red wine vinegar for the same amount of water and add 3tg of powdered milk.

Same recipe will make four 7" pizzas if you want to make personal sized ones.

Also works for a Grandma-style pizza in a half sheet pan (13" x 18")

For three balls:

588g bread flour
357g water
1 t instant dry yeast
3t salt
4t oil
1 1/4 t sugar

Basic Sauces (as of 12/22)

1 28-oz can tomatoes (Bianco di Napoli whole peeled or Sclafani crushed)
1 t salt
1 t oil
1 t Italian seasoning (optional)
A few minced basil leaves (optional)
1 clove crushed garlic (optional)

Smash or crush whole tomatoes. Mix ingredients. Don't cook. Let sit 30-60 minutes

pack and your measurements will be surprisingly consistent spoon after spoon. Same deal with oil.

Often, pizza recipes will include baker's percentages. These are just the percentage of water in a recipe compared with the flour. You'll see spirited debates about the best percentages to use; I've found that right around 60% makes for well-behaved dough and fast bakes. Much lower and things might get pretty crumbly; much higher and it'll take longer to bake.

Example:

$$\frac{180\text{mL water}}{300\text{g flour}} = .6 \text{ or } 60\%$$

Ingredients can stay simple. When you think about it, most pizzerias probably aren't sourcing anything exotic. Using bread flour is important -- you need the higher protein content and it's generally malted -- and King Arthur Bread Flour has a lot of protein and is readily available. I like instant yeast, but you could use the same amount of active dry yeast. There's rarely any need to dissolve or prove it unless it's really old or you found it at an AirBnb or something. Table salt, plain or iodized, works just fine, and so does normal white sugar. I just use tap water; if your tap water doesn't taste good, just use whatever you drink. I'm generally distrustful of claims that good pizza comes from certain water.

Kneading by hand isn't hard, so it's fine if you don't have a stand mixer. You just combine all the ingredients in a bowl, stir them together until it's all stuck together, plop it out on the counter, and then punch and fold it around for about ten minutes. You might need to flour your countertop or your hands a little, but at 60% hydration, it pretty quickly comes together and loses most of its stickiness.

If you do have a stand mixer, just dump all the ingredients together in the bowl, give it a stir, and use the dough hook and whatever setting the manufacturer recommends for kneading (for a Kitchenaid, it's 2). Let it crank for about six minutes. It should be a nice, smooth ball -- I never bother with the windowpane test. At this level hydration, with bread flour, and a thorough knead, I'm pretty confident it'll work just fine for you.

You'll see some people recommend a food processor or a no-knead dough. Those methods work okay, too, but I don't think they yield dough that's as easy to work with and in some ways, they're more fiddly than hand kneading.

Dough ball from above *Dough ball from below*

Some recipes call for a bulk ferment (letting the dough rise in one big ball before dividing). Try it if you want. You might find it helps make your dough better behaved later on, but I don't think it makes a huge difference and it adds another step. I've understood that it's an essential step with sourdough, but commercial yeast has plenty of power and your dough should rise and develop just fine if you divide it into balls right after kneading.

After you've got your dough kneaded and divided into equal sizes, you need to **ball it up**. I slap the dough down on an unfloured, unoiled countertop and gently twist and pinch the bottom of it between the edges of my palms (the part you'd karate chop with). It should take maybe a minute of pinchy twists to end up with a nice, taught,

smooth ball. Making sure there's not a huge canyon in the underside of it is important – if that's not all sealed together nicely, it can make huge fissures in your dough ball as it proofs.

Finally, pour about a tablespoon of oil into a medium sized bowl (mine are straight-sided, round 7-cup Pyrex glass bowls) and then roll your dough ball around in it so that it and the bowl have a thin, complete coat of oil. Cover tightly with plastic wrap or the lid (you may want to oil the underside) and then let it sit in your fridge for 1-4 days for a "cold ferment." It'll double (or more) in size. Pull it out of the fridge maybe two hours before you plan on stretching it; this could take less time if it's hot in your house and more if it's cold.

When you preheat your oven, with the stone or steel in it, set it as high as it'll go for an hour or more.

STRETCHING

Once your dough is up to temp and your oven is mostly preheated, it's time to shape it into a pizza.

I think a wooden peel – like a cutting board with a handle on it – is great for stretching your dough out, dressing it, and launching it onto a preheated stone or steel. It's probably not as good for rotating or retrieving your pizza as a thin metal one, though. If you can only have one, get the wooden one.

If you don't have a peel, you could try just using a cutting board like a peel, or you could put a piece of parchment on top of a cutting board and slide the parchment and pizza onto your stone. You'll lose a little heat transfer this way, since there's bound to be some dead air space in there somewhere, but it'll work until you get a hold of a peel.

Flour your peel and your dough heavily. Smoosh the dough into a rough disk between your hands, and then plop it down on the peel. **Stretch it along the outer edge first**, so that your dough sort of looks like a gentle hilltop with a low wall around its base. From there, **continue stretching it out**. You can pick it up and let it drape over your knuckles to stretch out the middle; I mostly just stretch it out on the peel, grabbing an edge and pulling it outward, rotating it, and doing it again until it's the diameter I want. You could toss it, but I think that's most valuable in a production setting and may take more practice than you're likely to get. YouTube videos or the old Pizzamaking.com web forums may be helpful for you; try terms like "edge stretching pizza" or "gravity stretching pizza."

Above left: Dough ball after overnight proof
Left: Fully stretched dough

SAUCE

I think most pizzerias use uncooked sauce. It makes it a lot easier for them to make more when they need it, but I think it also tastes brighter and fresher.

It's really pretty simple – get a good can of uncooked tomatoes, smash them up with your hands or a potato masher, add oil, salt, and herbs to taste, and then let it sit there for like an hour. I don't like using a blender; it seems like it introduces some off-flavors and buries some of the nice fruity, gardeny flavor found in good cans of tomatoes. It also turns it orange, and not a particularly appealing shade of orange.

I think I probably put about a tablespoon of oil, a teaspoon of salt, and a crushed clove of garlic in my sauce. Add a teaspoon of crushed red pepper if you want. A half teaspoon of Italian seasoning blend works if you're going for delivery vibes. A few basil leaves, finely sliced with a sharp knife, tends to be enough. Be a little careful with the basil; some basil tastes like licorice, and cooking it can bring that out more. Consider adding it post-oven if you're not into that.

Use one-half to three-quarters cup of sauce on a 14" pizza.

You'll have to try tomatoes and kinda just see what you like. Bianco Dinapoli is certainly my favorite; Sclafani is good and can be ordered online easily. Cento's whole peeled are relatively easy to find and I like them, too. I have understood that conventionally, cans of crushed tomatoes are made with riper tomatoes, since they still need to be a little firm in order to process them whole. There might be some value in trying crushed first if you're dealing with an unknown brand, I guess, but in practice, I think some brands have better tasting whole peeled tomatoes and others taste better crushed. If you can find them with just tomatoes and salt (and maybe basil), those are probably better than ones with citric acid or especially calcium chloride added.

CHEESE

Whole milk, low moisture mozzarella is the way to go. It melts and stretches better than part-skim mozz and doesn't sog out your pizza like fresh mozz does.

You'll need to shred it yourself. If you buy it pre-shredded, it'll be coated in some sort of starch or cellulose and it won't come together quite right. Papa John's serves as a good example of how pre-shredded cheese behaves and tastes; do it, I guess, if that's your thing, but it's not mine. I like Boar's Head the best -- they'll cut you a slab at the deli counter. Galbani is also good.

Slab of Boar's Head from the deli. It helps to tell them you don't care about the exact weight.

You might add some grated parmesan; traditionally, this is done below the main layer of cheese. For certain pizza styles, you might like some funk from provolone or fontina, some creaminess from Havarti, or maybe a little twang and dryness from some cheddar. I'd keep whole milk, low moisture mozz as at least 50% of your blend, but, you know, do what you want to do. I hear adding some cheese post-oven is getting to be a bit of a hip thing and you might like it, too.

I dunno; use maybe half a pound of cheese for a 14" pizza. Maybe less; err on the side of judicious.

If you get too much cheese on it, it'll slow down your bake, and potentially separate and turn into an oily mess. Too little, though, and you've deprived your pizza's eaters of some joy.

Grate a little extra; you and others will snitch some.

BUMGUNZ

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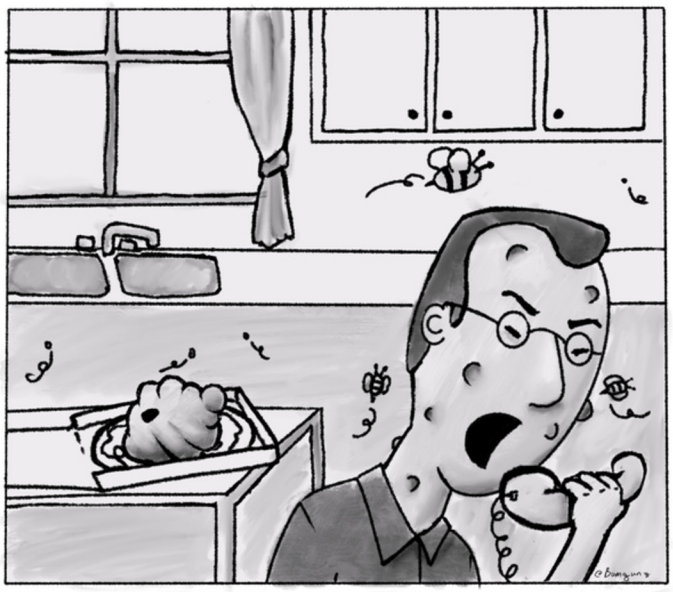

"I said extra CHEESE!"

LAUNCH

You miiight not get this right the first time. “Launching” your pizza is sliding it off of your peel and onto a waiting preheated stone or steel. I haven’t really devised a way to practice it, either, so you’re training with live ammo. When I first started out, I'd pull the stone out of the oven and try to kind of build the pizza on it. That really hampers heat transfer and oven spring, both of which are essential for a good pizza, so it's not ideal It is kinda how you do it if you're making a cast iron pizza, but I digress.

Do a few test shakes as you build your pizza to make sure it hasn’t stuck. Keep your peel very dry; chase down any little droplets of sauce or oil with some flour and rub it around. When you’re ready, turn on the oven light, open the door, and go for it. I feel like a series of short, small, jabby motions is a good way to start, retreating just a little bit each time as the pizza starts to drape down onto your stone. **It's kind of a confidence game. Dough can smell fear, so be not afraid.**

If you're still having trouble, you could get one of those pizza screens from a restaurant supplier. Corn meal or semolina can be helpful as ball bearings on your peel, but then there's corn meal or semolina on your crust. Not really my favorite.

If you really screw it up, well, I guess you’ve got a calzone. Or maybe just a pizza wad. It’ll taste fine, though you might get some subtle notes of failure. Get back on the horse, you’ll figure it out. And maybe turn on the fume hood or open a window or run a box fan with a furnace filter taped to the back.

Above left: my homemade wooden peel, great for building pizzas and launching.
Below left: my cheap thin aluminum peel, good for rotating and retrieving pizzas.

BAKING

There’s so much to say about heat that it’s hard to know exactly where to start. I’ll try to give you the quick version as a place to start, but if you've made it this far, I imagine you'll read the whole deal.

Set your oven as high as it will go and let it preheat for an hour or more with a stone in it. Launch your pizza and check your pizza around the three minute mark; it might need to be rotated. It’s done when it looks like you want it to – I like a nicely browned crust with some darkened spots on it, bubbly cheese with some sauce rendering through and some brown spots. If your pizza looks like that at the five or six minute mark, great! You did it. I bet it’s better than most of the pizzerias nearby. If it takes longer, well, it’ll still be good. Good sauce and cheese alone will make it a pretty satisfying pie.

Now for the longer format version.

The biggest challenge for home pizza cooks is heat. Home ovens just don't get hot enough. You also don't cook on a deck.

I outlined some of the differences between a pizzeria's oven and yours at home in "The Trouble with Good Advice," earlier in this issue, so I won't repeat all that information. Suffice it to say, you're dealing with less heat – lower temperatures, less thermal mass, fewer BTUs, etc. All that basically adds up to longer bakes, and longer bakes take a lot of the life out of your crust. Spending extra time in the oven makes crusts more crackery and less chewy, with no hope for a pillowy crust.

There is an array of solutions for mitigating home ovens' heat deficiencies. The easiest thing to do is just go buy good pizza somewhere in your town. You could also try caring less –- maybe your crust is a little dry or crackery, maybe you furtively throw away your crusts, maybe you dunk them in ranch; they're still going to do the job come dinnertime. You could make pizza that lends itself well to home oven temperatures, like a cast iron pizza, bar/tavern pizza, Detroit style pizza, or sheet tray (like a Grandma or Sicilian) pizza. You could make surprisingly satisfying and low-effort pizzas out of tortillas or English muffins or French bread or naan or bagels, a can of Hunt's tomato sauce, and whatever cheese you have in the fridge.

For those of us that just can't leave these stones unturned, I'm afraid the only way forward is to transfer as much heat as possible and as quickly as possible out of your oven and into your pizza.

Generally, you do this by:

- Cranking your oven up as high as it'll go
- Preheating for at least an hour
- Baking your pizza on a conductive surface like stone or steel
- Turning on the broiler for some or all of your bake

French bread pizza: satisfying, low effort, no special equipment.

Grandma pizza: works great even in low temp ovens without broilers.

Detroit style: also great in any oven, but with crispy, almost fried cheese edges. Feeds many.

If you have a hot enough oven with a broiler in the main compartment, you can probably get your bakes down into the 5-6 minute range by following that advice. The crust should be well-browned, the cheese bubbly and browned in places, and there should be some microblisters on the outside of your crust.

If that's not describing your pizza at the 5-6 minute mark, then bake it a little longer. It'll still taste good, but it'll be worth taking some steps to increase the heat transfer next time. If you were baking on a pan instead of a stone, switch to a stone. Maybe switch from a stone to a thick (3/8-inch or half-inch) slab of steel. Try an even longer preheat. If your oven has a convection fan, turn it on. Switch over to the broiler right as you launch the pizza, or maybe even five minutes before. Raise your racks up higher. You'll figure out a sweet spot and a minimum bake time for your oven. Hopefully, you can bring that down to under six minutes. Even better if you get it under five.

Try not to worry about cranking up your oven. If it's even remotely new, it has a self-clean feature that takes it many hundreds of degrees beyond its maximum operating temp, and that clean cycle hasn't caused it to melt or catch fire yet. Also, it might be reassuring that I did it frequently in a real crappy old wall oven. It never killed it; as far as I know, it's still kicking at a rental property. If it's energy consumption you're worried about, in my market having the oven cranked for two hours during peak rates would cost about $1.53.

This is a little harder if there's no broiler in the main compartment of your oven. I've got a method for you that involves a cheap pizza stone, black ceramic tiles, and aluminum foil. It's a lot more fiddling but it's surprisingly effective, even in an underpowered 500°F oven. I'll include the diagrams and some photos in a future issue if there's interest in it. ♦

DIRECTIONS:

1. **Remove dough balls from fridge** 2-4 hours before you bake them. Leave covered in their containers.
2. **Preheat oven and stone or steel** at the oven's maximum temperature for 60-90 minutes.
3. About ten minutes before baking, flour your pizza peel. Remove dough ball from container and smoosh and slap it into a puck. Flour it, too.
4. Working on your peel or gravity stretching, **stretch the dough out to about a 14" ball.**
5. Shake peel to make sure pizza skin hasn't stuck.
6. **Top with sauce.** You want to cover the whole skin, but don't heap it on.
7. **Top with cheese.** Whole milk, low moisture mozzarella, not pre-shredded.
8. **Launch your pizza** onto the preheated stone or steel in your oven. **Turn the broiler on high**.
9. You might need to rotate the pizza midway through.
10. **Pull the pizza out with your peel** once it's nicely browned and the cheese looks cooked and bubbly.
11. **Let cool for 2-3 minutes** on a wire rack; slice and **eat immediately afterward**.

~5 minutes on stone at 550°F. Rotated at 3 minute mark and then hit the broiler.

TIPS AND TRICKS

- Dough will need two hours (or maybe less) to warm up in the summer; four (or more) in the winter. Also think about the surface you're setting them on; a cold stone countertop will slow down the process.
- Look for YouTube videos stretching pizza dough. I mostly leave mine on the peel and stretch out the edges, which you'll see some people do, even though "edge stretching pizza" isn't a search parameter with many hits.
- If your dough has giant bubbles erupting from it, it may have proofed too long at room temperature or maybe you need to form tighter balls before proofing. YouTube is a good resource again; the trick I learned was to ball on a dry – unfloured and especially unoiled – countertop.
- You can "dock" or add extra depressions to the skin before you sauce and cheese it if you don't like bubbles to form during cooking. Your fingers or the back of a wooden spoon work fine. Might need a little flour.
- Keep your yeast in the freezer and then you don't need to really worry about its age.
- 3-gallon icing buckets from your deli will be food safe and have lids, so they're useful for storing flour if you're buying it in bulk
- If your dough is too stubborn and snapping back into a smaller diameter, just leave it alone for ten minutes.
- If your pizza sticks to the peel, carefully lift it off (maybe even with some coaxing from a thin spatula) and add more flour.
- You may end up using the broiler right at launch, ten minutes before launch, three minutes after launch, or not at all. If the bottom is burning before the cheese cooks, try starting the broiler right at launch instead of before. If the cheese is cooking too fast and the bottom still looks pale, try running the broiler right before launch and then switch to bake (or convection bake) right at launch.
- I don't really know quantities for sauce and cheese. Maybe like a half a cup of sauce and six ounces of cheese or something? Try something and dial it in the way you like it.
- Letting the pizza cool for a couple minutes on a wire rack will help retain the outermost crispiness on the crust.
- Just serve it when it's ready; if you wait to have enough for everyone at a larger party, everyone will eat cold pizza and wonder why you didn't just order some.

PIZZA IDEAS

Tomato Pie | mozz first, red sauce on top

Elote | white sauce, mozz, tomatoes, roasted corn, green chiles, queso fresco and cilantro post-oven

Bougie Hawaiian | red sauce, ham glazed in pineapple syrup and calabrian chiles, pineapple

(Sort of) Bee's Knees | white sauce, mozz, breakfast sausage, arugula, hot honey (adapted from Pizzicletta)

PRODUCTS AND EQUIPMENT

You should know two things before taking any of my advice about what to buy. First, there's definitely no one interested in paying me to recommend their products, since I'm just a guy and this isn't my job. Second, I don't care all that much. I might buy a cheese grater that I think is going to be a good one, but probably not until an old one broke or got gross or lost or something. It's possible the former gives me some credibility in your mind; the latter, though should probably have you looking elsewhere for serious product or equipment reviews.

Some ingredients I like follow, roughly in order of preference:

TOMATOES

- Bianco DiNapoli Whole Peeled
- Sclafani Crushed
- Cento Whole Peeled

MOZZARELLA

- Boar's Head Whole Milk Mozzarella
- Galbani Whole Milk, Low Moisture Mozzarella

FLOUR

- Gold Medal All Trumps Bread Flour (likely only available through purveyor in 50lb bags)
- King Arthur Bread Flour

YEAST

- I haven't found any difference among Fleischmann's, Red Star, and SAF.
- Instant, Rapid Rise, and bread machine are all the same. Active dry is different, but mostly interchangeable.

OIL

- Costco's extra virgin olive oil is just fine in the dough and for balling.
- If you like topping your pizza with oil, you might notice something fancier.

And some equipment I think you'll find useful. I'm unconcerned with brands except where noted.

MEASURING

- Digital scale
- Metal measuring cups and spoons
- Infrared thermometer for understanding your cooking environment
- Digital instant read thermometer

KNEADING

- KitchenAid 600-series 6-quart lift head mixer
- Flour shaker with screen, not perforations
- Bench scraper

PROOFING

- Pyrex 7-cup round glass storage

PEELS

- Wooden peel. I made mine.
- Thin aluminum peel. Perforated sounds nice.

BAKING

- In most cases, a steel is probably best. 3/8" or thicker.
- For stones, thicker is also better. Cordierite probably beats ceramic.
- Lloyd's Pans makes really nice Detroit pans; I imagine their others are also great.
- Lodge cast iron works just fine.
- I prefer steel sheet pans to aluminum, and dark to shiny.

PIZZINE